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Anilda Ibrahimi, *Rosso come una sposa*:

Traduzione e Analisi

(capitoli VIII-XVII)

Di Kyra Benforte

Tesi di Laurea in Italian Studies

University of Richmond, VA

Relatori della tesi: Dott.ssa L. Radi e Dott. A. Russell

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Vorrei anche ringraziare i miei genitori che mi hanno dato l'opportunità di andare all'Università di Richmond e avere un'esperienza straordinaria. Vi voglio bene! Grazie anche alla parte italiana della mia famiglia per avermi sempre parlato in Italiano.

Introduzione:

La mia tesi di laurea per Italian Studies consiste nella traduzione ed analisi di alcuni capitoli di *Rosso come una sposa* di Anilda Ibrahimi. Questo progetto ha avuto inizio durante una lezione nel corso *Italian Literature of Exile* nell'autunno 2018. Uno dei primi progetti del nostro corso era la traduzione di alcuni capitoli di *Rosso come una sposa*. Ho allora deciso di continuare il lavoro intrapreso da me e dai miei compagni per la mia tesi di laurea. Ho avuto la rara opportunità di incontrare di persona Anilda Ibrahimi, la scrittrice, questo semestre durante i lavori del convegno *Migration: The Contested Spaces of the Mediterranean*. In questa tesi, presenterò alcune informazioni biografiche sulla scrittrice Anilda Ibrahimi. Dopo discuterò brevemente la natura della letteratura transnazionale e i modi in cui Ibrahimi si inserisce in questa letteratura nel suo libro *Rosso come una sposa*. In seguito discuterò la trama di *Rosso come una sposa*, i personaggi principali, ed i temi più importanti del libro e in particolare nei capitoli da me tradotti. La parte finale è consacrata alla traduzione di dieci capitoli del romanzo.

La vita dell'autrice:

Anilda Ibrahimi è nata a Vlorë in Albania nel 1972. Ha studiato letteratura moderna all'Università di Tirana in Albania. Durante la sua permanenza a Tirana, Ibrahimi ha lavorato in televisione e nelle stazioni radio. Ha anche scritto per un quotidiano durante questo periodo. Nel 1994, lei ha lasciato l'Albania e si è trasferita in Svizzera, dove ha pubblicato una raccolta di poesie intitolata *Cristallo di tristezza*. Dopo un breve periodo in Svizzera, Ibrahimi si è trasferita a Roma dove risiede dal 1997 con il marito e i figli. A Roma, lei ha lavorato per *Il Consiglio Italiano per i Rifugiati*. Si tratta di un'organizzazione umanitaria indipendente. Come indicato sul loro sito, si sono stabiliti dal 1990 e il loro scopo principale è “di difendere i diritti dei rifugiati e dei richiedenti asilo.”¹ Durante il suo lavoro per *Il Consiglio Italiano per i Rifugiati*, la

¹ Onlus, Cir. “Consiglio Italiano Per I Rifugiati.” *CIR ONLUS*, 18 Apr. 1970, www.cir-onlus.org/.

scrittrice ha avuto l'opportunità di parlare con molti rifugiati e immigrati da paesi diversi. Durante questo periodo, lei è stata ispirata da molte storie diverse, alcune delle quali sono incluse nei suoi libri.

Dopo essersi trasferita a Roma, lei ha cominciato a scrivere i suoi romanzi. Il suo primo libro *Rosso come una sposa* è uscito nel 2008. *L'amore e gli stracci del tempo* è apparso nel 2009 e *Non c'è dolcezza* nel 2012. Il suo ultimo libro *Il Tuo Nome è Una Promessa* è uscito nel 2017. Tutti i suoi libri sono pubblicati con Einaudi. *Il Tuo Nome è Una Promessa* ha vinto Il Premio Rapallo Carige. *Rosso come una sposa* ha vinto il Premio Edoardo Kihlgren – Città di Milano, Il Premio Corrado Alvaro, Il Premio Città di Penne e Il Premio Giuseppe Antonio Arena e La Magna Capitana. I suoi libri sono stati tradotti in molte lingue diverse, tranne l'albanese. Lei dice di non volere che i suoi libri vengano tradotti in albanese perché non ci sono infrastrutture in Albania per promuovere l'educazione per tutti.² “The Borgean Project,” un’organizzazione senza scopo di lucro che lavora su progetti per terminare la povertà nel mondo, parla del problema dell’istruzione in Albania. Dopo il comunismo, l’Albania non ha avuto abbastanza soldi per avere un forte sistema istruttivo. Una gran parte del popolo in Albania non ha avuto l'opportunità di andare a scuola per molti anni. Adesso, il governo in Albania sta cercando di elevare la qualità delle scuole e anche aumentare i fondi per l’istruzione³. Lei pensa che le persone facoltose soltanto in Albania avrebbero l'opportunità di leggere le sue opere e lei non vuole sostenere questa polarizzazione economica e accademica in Albania.

La letteratura transnazionale:

Nel mondo di oggi viene data una sempre maggiore importanza alla letteratura transnazionale, cioè la letteratura che si estende tra due paesi, due lingue, due territori diversi. La letteratura transnazionale è una letteratura che combina aspetti di due culture, lingue, e mentalità

² Nel convegno, “Migration: Contested Spaces of the Mediterranean,” Ibrahim ha detto questo.

³ Borgen, Clint. “Education in Albania.” *The Borgen Project*, Clint Borgen
[Http://Borgenproject.org/Wp-Content/Uploads/The_Borgen_Project_Logo_small.Jpg](http://Borgenproject.org/Wp-Content/Uploads/The_Borgen_Project_Logo_small.Jpg), 9 Apr. 2019,
Borgenproject.org/education-in-albania/.

diverse. La letteratura transnazionale è rappresentativa del mondo di oggi perché la migrazione è un aspetto centrale in molti paesi. Ibrahim, come altre scrittrici transnazionali, sottolinea l'importanza di questa letteratura per creare un collegamento tra le culture e le persone che abitano queste culture. Futura Cirrincione, un'alumna dalla Università di Bologna, dice che il ruolo della letteratura transnazionale è di “ creare (o ricreare) il fondamentale legame tra Noi e Loro, attraverso storie personali ma anche collettive, che riportino alla luce frammenti di un passato talvolta dimenticato.”⁴ Per Anilda Ibrahim, una cosa centrale è l'importanza di raccontare la storia dell'individuo che poi diventa la storia di tutta una generazione. Per gli scrittori che raccontano queste storie, “il racconto è concepito come trasmissione di valori, modo di socializzazione, costruzione di storia collettiva a partire dalla storia privata, con evidente rinvio alla dialettica micro-storia/macro-storia e conseguente rivisitazione e ridefinizione di mondi passati e presenti.”⁵ La letteratura transnazionale usa la vita quotidiana e la storia individuale per rappresentare il passato ed il presente di un gruppo di persone.

La letteratura transnazionale è anche interessante grazie all'uso della lingua italiana nelle opere. Per molti scrittori transnazionali italiani, l'uso della lingua italiana è una cosa centrale. Per questi scrittori l'uso dell'italiano dimostra come le loro storie sono diventate italiane. Oggi, la migrazione è un fenomeno globale e la letteratura transnazionale dimostra questo. In Italia, la letteratura transnazionale è usata per evidenziare alla cultura italiana che la migrazione è una cosa comune: “Therefore, discussing migration literature means discussing the recent changes in contemporary Italian culture. Literature becomes the context in which one can examine contemporary Italian multiculturalism and imagine future developments.”⁶

Ibrahim è una scrittrice transnazionale che ha cercato di creare nuovi ritratti per i migranti attraverso la letteratura. La letteratura transnazionale è considerata una letteratura che si estende tra due paesi e offusca i confini. La letteratura transnazionale parla di una storia che non è facile ma è molto importante. *Rosso come una sposa* di Ibrahim rappresenta la letteratura

⁴ Cirrincione, Futura. “La Letteratura Italiana Della Migrazione.” *University of Bologna*.

⁵ Cirrincione, Futura. “La Letteratura Italiana Della Migrazione.” *University of Bologna*.

⁶ Cirrincione, Futura. “La Letteratura Italiana Della Migrazione.” *University of Bologna*.

transnazionale, poiché concede al lettore uno sguardo sulla vita caotica ma allo stesso tempo semplice degli albanesi, questo popolo così vicino a loro, nel 20 ° e 21 imo secolo. Ibrahimi dimostra l'aspetto transnazionale nel suo libro con la storia della famiglia Buronja e con la migrazione di Dora. Ibrahimi usa la storia della famiglia, la migrazione di Dora, e la relazione politica tra l'Italia e l'Albania per spiegare la transnazionalità del mondo a cui i protagonisti appartengono e a cui noi tutti apparteniamo.

Rosso come una sposa

Riassunto:

Il primo libro di Ibrahimi, *Rosso come una sposa*, segue la storia di molte generazioni di una famiglia albanese del ventesimo secolo. Questa famiglia vive a Kaltra, un piccolo villaggio nelle montagne albanesi del Sud. Kaltra non esiste nella vita reale, ma è solo una creazione di Ibrahimi.⁷ La storia comincia con il matrimonio di Saba, una delle protagoniste del libro. Dopo incontriamo la famiglia Buronja. Il cuore della famiglia Buronja è Meliha, la madre di Saba. Oltre a lei, Meliha ha avuto Afrodita, Esma, e Bedena. Ha avuto cinque figlie e quattro figli. La quinta figlia è Sultana, che era sposata con Omer prima di morire durante il parto. I quattro figli erano soldati durante la guerra e l'unico che ha vissuto era Myrto. La storia segue le vicende della famiglia Buronja e di altri abitanti a Kaltra prima, durante, e dopo la seconda guerra mondiale. Per esempio, vediamo i rapporti tra gli abitanti di Kaltra ed i soldati italiani che qui vengono chiamati *peppini*. La storia continua con le storie di Saba e di suo marito Omer. Saba ha vissuto con Omer e la sua enorme famiglia per molti anni fino al periodo del dopoguerra. Saba e le sue cognate hanno lavorato insieme nella casa, come tutte le donne di Kaltra. Il periodo durante la guerra è terribile per le persone a Kaltra e molti episodi raccontano le atrocità dei soldati nei confronti dei cittadini. Per esempio, i soldati hanno ucciso i fratelli di Saba di fronte alla sua famiglia ed anche hanno ucciso Behije mentre lei era incinta. I soldati anche hanno ucciso una donna con il suo bambino nella sua casa.

Dopo la guerra, vediamo come la vita quotidiana a Kaltra è cambiata e assistiamo all'avvento del comunismo. Saba ed altre donne vanno a scuola, hanno un lavoro ed una vita sociale. Saba e le sorelle si incontrano per parlare della loro vita e della loro famiglia. Oltre alle vite delle sorelle Buronja, leggiamo per esempio, la storia di Adile, la moglie del ex-imam del villaggio. Lei diventa madre di tredici figli quando suo marito prende una seconda moglie, in una

⁷ Nel convegno, "Migration: Contested Spaces of the Mediterranean," Ibrahimi ha detto che Kaltra non esiste nella vita reale ma molte persone hanno provato di trovare il villaggio in Albania. Ma questo è impossibile.

storia che ha del tragi-comico e lei muore. La storia segue la vita di Meliha e dei suoi figli con i vari dilemmi, errori e vicissitudini.

Nella seconda parte del libro, vediamo come le giovani generazioni della famiglia vivono, dal punto di visto di Dora, la nipote di Saba e simbolo probabilmente della Ibrahimi stessa nella storia. Dora narra della vita dei suoi genitori e del loro matrimonio. Lei racconta in dettaglio anche la sua infanzia. In questa seconda parte ci sono molte storie sul comunismo e i modi in cui ha influito sulla vita delle persone a Kaltra e altrove. Per esempio, la storia di Endri è molto commovente. Il ruolo della religione in un paese comunista è anche una cosa centrale nella seconda parte di *Rosso come una sposa*. Verso la fine del libro, Dora racconta i suoi anni all'Università di Tirana e assistiamo alla caduta del comunismo. Dopo la laurea, Dora acquista un biglietto aereo di sola andata. La giovane protagonista, come la Ibrahimi stessa, lascia l'Albania e dopo un breve soggiorno in Svizzera, arriva Roma.

Analisi:

La narratrice narra le vicende della sua infanzia e delle donne che hanno avuto un grandissimo impatto nella sua vita.. Ibrahimi prova a rompere gli schemi di una tipica donna albanese e crea la propria identità in *Rosso come una sposa*. Le donne in questo libro sono forti, narratrici iconiche che creano una nuova prospettiva sulla storia dell'Albania.⁸ *Rosso come una sposa* di Ibrahimi attribuisce una grande importanza al ruolo delle donne nella vita della protagonista e nella vita quotidiana albanese. Il passaggio del tempo nel libro segue il movimento di indipendenza e di libertà che le donne in *Rosso come una sposa* sperimentano. Ci sono molte donne presenti nella storia che dimostrano l'importanza della donna nella società albanese e i modi in cui le donne albanesi sono i centri della vita familiare e sociale. *Rosso come una sposa* è un perfetto esempio del modo in cui le donne hanno molti ruoli diversi a seconda del contesto sociale.

⁸ "Anilda Ibrahimi [Italy, Albania]." *Internationales Literaturfestival Berlin*, literaturfestival.com/autoren-en/autoren-2010-en/anilda-ibrahimi.

Saba occupa un ruolo centrale in questo romanzo e investe ruoli diversi. Lei ha un lavoro e gestisce i soldi di famiglia, è madre e moglie, è sorella, ed è pure la persona nella sua famiglia che va a raccontare le cose di famiglia ai morti. Nonostante le sue numerose responsabilità verso gli altri, lei è padrona della sua vita. Seppur in un contesto patriarcale, lei ha controllo sul marito e prende decisioni importanti per se stessa come la sua educazione e la vita matrimoniale. Per lei e molte altre donne di Kaltra, il periodo del dopoguerra era un tempo in cui la loro vita è cambiata. Saba afferma che dopo la guerra: “io non faccio temena a nessuno. Una volta, tanto tempo fa, quando ero un'altra Saba, passavo le mie giornate a fare temena alla suocera, ai cognati e al marito. Quel tempo li è finito, quella Saba li è morta”.⁹ Saba rappresenta un cambiamento nella situazione delle donne a Kaltra ed in Albania in generale. La narratrice afferma

Adesso Saba, dopo tante fatiche, era arrivata a un punto in cui le cose erano semplicemente quelle che sembravano. Lavorava, aveva mandato i figli a scuola, aveva la sua casa senza la tribù numerosa della famiglia di suo marito. Aveva tante amiche che andavano e venivano dalla sua sartoria con i vestiti nuovi cuciti da lei. Si può dire in cinque parole quello che stava finalmente vivendo: era padrona della sua vita.¹⁰

La vita è cambiata dopo la guerra per molte donne albanesi. Le protagoniste del romanzo non sembrano più essere solo oggetti, ma esseri autonomi che prendevano decisioni. Le donne hanno avuto la possibilità di fare delle scelte nelle loro vite e di cambiare la società albanese. Con il comunismo, le donne hanno trovato posti di lavoro nei villaggi e hanno avuto qualche libertà rispetto alle soppressioni del passato. Tuttavia, Ibrahim non descrive una vita rosea o semplice per le donne. Nonostante qualche timido cambiamento apportato dal comunismo, le donne vivevano in strutture ferree senza libertà di pensiero.

Un altro esempio di donna nel libro è Afrodita, una delle sorelle di Saba. Afrodita è l'unica sorella che ha lasciato il villaggio ed è andata in città. Lei ha sposato un medico e non ha

⁹ Ibrahim, Anilda. *Rosso Come Una Sposa*. Einaudi, 2016. pg. 55

¹⁰ Ibrahim, Anilda. *Rosso Come Una Sposa*. Einaudi, 2016. pg. 49

avuto bambini perché ha preso la pillola anticoncezionale. Afrodita non è come le altre donne, e questo è difficile per la famiglia. Saba dice che

Afrodita non aveva quella particolare aura che sa di madre. E non è una questione di figli, ce l'hanno tante donne anche senza partorire, ma lei no, lei non ce l'aveva. Afrodita era felice, in fondo forse non le dispiaceva affatto, chi lo sa se non era quella la vita che aveva sempre voluto.¹¹

Afrodita è un esempio alternativo di donna albanese. Lei non ha figli, e nemmeno quella “particolare aura che sa di madre”, ma lei ha una vita felice sia professionalmente che personalmente. Le donne del libro possono avere ruoli diversi, ma tutti importanti all'interno della società e delle comunità a cui appartengono.

Saba e molte delle donne a Kaltra sembrano avere controllo sugli uomini del villaggio e in particolare i propri mariti. Saba e Esma, una delle sorelle di Saba, sono esempi perfetti di questo. Saba usa l'abitudine al bere di Omer, suo marito, per ricattarlo. Ibrahim dice che quando Omer fa una cosa cattiva Saba dice, “Domani vado a fare due chiacchiere con il segretario del partito” [...] . E suo marito diventava un agnellino. Oggi si direbbe che lei lo ricattava. Ma se per questo le donne del suo paese l'avevano ricattato per tutta la vita”.¹² La situazione con Esma ed il colonnello, suo marito, era un po' differente, ma Esma pure aveva il potere di controllare suo marito. La madre del colonnello non può capire come Esma ha tutto questo controllo su suo figlio. La madre pensa che Esma usa “i suoi trucchetti e le sue magie” e “aveva trasformato il cervello del figlio in ‘cervello d'asino’”.¹³ Le donne in *Rosso come una sposa* hanno un qualche potere sulle loro relazioni. Gli uomini, malgrado la mancanza di potere, pensano solo alle loro responsabilità di fornire per la famiglia e non pensano di aiutare le donne nella casa.

Un'altra cosa interessante in *Rosso Come Una Sposa* è il ruolo della religione e come la religione ha un impatto sul destino umano. In *Rosso Come Una Sposa*, la religione è una cosa

¹¹ Ibrahim, Anilda. *Rosso Come Una Sposa*. Einaudi, 2016. pg. 59

¹² Ibrahim, Anilda. *Rosso Come Una Sposa*. Einaudi, 2016. pg. 48

¹³ Ibrahim, Anilda. *Rosso Come Una Sposa*. Einaudi, 2016. pg. 67

centrale nella vita quotidiana dei protagonisti. Secondo le persone a Kaltra, Allah decide e determina il destino di tutti. Allah è usato per descrivere perché la vita di qualcuno si è rivelata in un certo modo piuttosto che un altro. Saba dice che “la sua vita aveva percorso e continuava a percorrere esattamente la strada che Allah aveva deciso per lei”.¹⁴ In *Rosso Come Una Sposa*, la presenza divina crea il destino di tutti dal momento in cui sono nati. Secondo Saba, “Allah il terzo giorno dopo la nascita ci scrive il nostro destino sulla nuca: quello che faremo, quello che diventeremo e soprattutto quello che non diventeremo mai”.¹⁵ Ogni cosa è decisa da Allah, le persone normali non possono cambiare il destino, il fato, o la vita. Queste cose sono predeterminate per le persone a Kaltra e hanno un impatto sulla vita di tutti gli abitanti del villaggio.

Il comunismo cambia la vita a Kaltra ed è molto importante in *Rosso come una sposa*. Il comunismo è centrale nella cultura albanese di questo periodo e le strutture sociali stabilite dal comunismo sono centrali nella vita quotidiana degli abitanti a Kaltra. I lavori nel villaggio, le azioni dei cittadini, e le abitudini sono determinati dal comunismo e dal partito. Bedena, una delle sorelle di Saba, ha raccontato di una donna, la moglie di un *kulak* (nemico del partito), che ha messo le medaglie del partito su un mulo. La donna che ha fatto questo ha dovuto chiedere scusa ai membri del partito e a tutta la sua comunità. Un esempio questo di come il partito ha avuto controllo sulla società. Le persone a Kaltra che hanno sostenuto il comunismo, come Bedena, hanno fatto ogni cosa per proteggerlo: “Questo è il discorso di Bedena. Vuole provvedimenti seri in modo che questi attacchi al partito, al Paese e all’intero campo socialista non si ripetano più!”.¹⁶ Il partito, oltre a Allah, ha la possibilità di scegliere il futuro di una persona. Il partito controllava tutta la vita delle persone che hanno vissuto là.

¹⁴ Ibrahim, Anilda. *Rosso Come Una Sposa*. Einaudi, 2016. pg. 59

¹⁵ Ibrahim, Anilda. *Rosso Come Una Sposa*. Einaudi, 2016. pg. 60

¹⁶ Ibrahim, Anilda. *Rosso Come Una Sposa*. Einaudi, 2016. pg. 80

Riflessioni sulla traduzione:

Il processo della traduzione per me era una cosa molto interessante. Per la maggior parte, la traduzione non era particolarmente difficile. La parte più difficile era l'uso di parole a me sconosciute. Ibrahim ha usato qualche parola albanese e parole religiose in albanese. Parole come *qilin*, *kurva*, e *kulak* sono alcuni esempi. *Qilin* significa un tappeto fatto in Albania che è anche usato per le preghiere. *Kurva* significa una prostituta o una donna promiscua. Questo termine ha un significato molto forte nella lingua albanese e Ibrahim ha voluto mantenerlo nella lingua originale per dimostrare tutta la forza della parola nello sguardo della società albanese. *Kulak* è un contadino che possedeva la terra, ma che l'aveva persa dopo l'ascesa del comunismo.

Un altro aspetto difficile consisteva nelle espressioni o detti tipici. . Per esempio, ho tradotto “tempo dei lupi” come “the time of the wolves” invece di “the witching hour.” Cose come queste hanno aumentato la difficoltà di tradurre questo libro. Malgrado questa difficoltà, le parole e i detti erano la parte più interessante della traduzione, perché sono riuscita a capire molte cose della cultura albanese e anche italiana che non sapevo prima. Anche ho avuto l'opportunità di vedere come la lingua albanese e quella italiana sono intrecciate nel testo.

Traduzione di *Rosso come una sposa*, capitoli VIII-XVII:

Part One, Chapter Eight

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In those years Saba lived in a very big house with two of Omer's brothers, their wives and children, and her almighty mother-in-law. The house had three wings, one for each family, a courtyard where there was the oven, the water well, a bathroom for everyone, and where the three sisters-in-law, under the command of their mother-in-law, did the everyday things.

As time passed, a strong spirit of solidarity was created between the three sisters-in-law such that each one of them considered the other's children their own. If one was unwell, the others covered up in front of their mother-in-law, doing also her work. If the mother-in-law denied one the permission to leave and visit their own mother, the others found an excuse to make her leave the house.

With the power they would acquire becoming mother-in-laws, sometimes the women spent time waiting with happiness to grow old.

* * * * *

It was winter, and one day Saba decided to ask her mother-in-law to go and say hello to her family. She knew that the battalion of her partisan brothers was in the area and maybe they would pass by the house. Saba was still a new mother; her only male child had been born recently.

"My daughter-in-law," responded her mother-in-law, "do you think it is okay to leave the house by yourself? With the Germans who could arrive at any moment? The fright would not be good for you, nor your breastfeeding, and then who would think of Luan?"

Saba did not reply. In the end, her mother-in-law was right. But

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the desire to see her brothers again or even to know how they were was great.

Terrible things were said about the Germans. Especially compared to the Turks and the Greeks, not to mention those gracious Italians.¹⁷ The other day at the village fountain she had heard a gruesome story. The sister of one of her neighbors that lives in Bushat found herself alone at home, her husband and everyone else had gone to the funeral of a relative. That morning the Germans had passed in front of the house of the poor woman and her dog had barked, attracting their attention. They suddenly turned around. They saw that mangy dog that ate from his bowl. From a helmet, to be specific, because the dog had a German helmet at the place of his bowl. Two of them turned their heads, then they came closer. The woman hearing these sounds, began to run towards the stairs with her son in her arms. She wanted to reach the cellar: hiding there, she would have waited for her family. The two Germans saw a shadow and began to shoot. Then they ran to reach their companions who had not interrupted their march.

That night, when re-entering the house, the family found the young woman sitting on the stairs. With her head resting on her chest and with the bundle attached to her breast. The baby continued to drink milk from the mother, who looked like she was sleeping. She had only a bullet hole in the middle of her forehead. Her lips by now had become blue.

Thinking about these stories, Saba continued to work with the others and meanwhile she cried in silence.

“Saba,” her sisters-in-law proposed, “we can cover for you. We will take care of Luan, and also everything else. But return before dark.”

Saba took the shortest street, extremely steep. The house of her husband was on top of the village and she had to be quick. It was snowing and everything was white, a whiteness so dazzling that it made it difficult to distinguish things. Walking down she saw the whole valley: everything

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was calm, everything was flat. There was not a living soul on the street. It was the witching hour.

¹⁷ In the text, Ibrahim uses *peppini* to describe the Italians.

When she arrived in front of her family's house, she sat and breathed with difficulty. She ran like a rolling pin. She knocked slowly, but there was no response. Not even a murmur came from inside, not even the sound of a baby. She knocked again.

"Mamma, it is Saba. Rubie, Rubie," she tried to call her sister-in-law.

A white curtain moved in the window, then on the steps. The door opened halfway and her mother stuck her head out.

"What are you doing here at this time?" Meliha scolded her. "Your mother-in-law gave you permission to go out with this snow?" Saba entered without responding.

Inside the room with the fire she recognized the shapes of her brothers. There were three of them. Her nephews were huddled around their fathers, her sisters-in-law were sitting on the *qilin*,¹⁸ and no one was speaking. Saba ran to hug her brothers and she cried, murmuring, "I knew that I would see you, I felt it. I knew it..."

One of her brothers was missing: the youngest of them all, Myrto. They said he was on a mission in another area. Saba sighed in relief. Thank god, they were all okay, all okay...

"We are waiting for the dark and then we will leave," they said. "We have to meet our companions."

Her sister-in-law Behije placed the coffee close and sat herself next to her husband. Behije waited, she was in the last month [of her pregnancy]. Her husband Isan came back to visit her about nine months ago... he did not even know that he was about to become a father. He was crazy with happiness.

Saba sipped the coffee, but she had not yet finished it when she heard a shot in the courtyard and then kicks at the door.

"Open, you are surrounded! Open up!"

They brought them all to the courtyard. The official highest in rank told the men that if they spoke they could save their lives.

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"Lost time," responded Emin.

¹⁸ A flat, tapestry woven carpet or rug traditionally made in Albania. These rugs can also serve as prayer rugs. The word originates from Persian. "Kilim." *Merriam-Webster*, Merriam-Webster, www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/kilim.

“The women, the women have nothing to do with this,” said Isan. “Let them return inside.”

“I make the decisions,” responded the official. “But we will see which is your wife...”

“If you touch her, you will regret it.”

“What, you will kill me? We will see, which is your wife?”

Those civilians that were with them indicated towards the woman with the stomach.

“I see that she did not lose time while you were away. Don’t tell me that you are happy about the birth of a bastard.”

The official came close to Behije to touch her stomach, but Isan made a shield with his body.

“Damn, take it up with me if you have balls.”

Insults flew from one side to the other passing through the interpreter. But strangely the responses arrived before the interpreter had done his work: the language of violence does not need to be translated.

The German official pointed his gun towards Isan’s forehead.

“I have had enough of you all. Speak or I will blow your brains out. We will see if you decide to speak first.”

He took away the gun and got a rifle. He opened the bayonet, resting it on Behije’s stomach.

“Will you speak or not? Maybe I will do you a favor: I will free you from a bastard to whom you must give your name.”

A spit arrived in his face before he had finished the phrase. Without even cleaning his face, the German forced his hand on her stomach. Behije did not have time to see. She fell on the floor with her guts out, rather with the baby out. She put her hands above herself to protect herself. It was the last movement she made. Machine gun fire took full force on her forehead, her body, and on the baby. The same shower of bullets also hit the three brothers.

The other women were saved by the official.

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Saba, her mother and her sisters-in-law carried the corpse of Behije and cut her umbilical cord. They cleaned the baby and covered him in the clean blanket that his mother had ready for him. Then, with a needle and thread, they sewed her stomach that had been opened by the bayonet. Behije was combed and dressed in her best clothes. They buried them, together, one next to the other.

The only thing that Saba wanted to know was who had informed the soldiers. She found out years later, when she understood that knowing would not change anything. She did not feel hatred nor desire for revenge. The spy was a member of the Fronte nazionale,¹⁹ the party alternative to the Communist party, that saw the Germans as passing allies. The spy would be the one to tell everything to Saba before she died, sure of not her forgiveness but of her silence. Her family would still pay highly for this confession. But Saba would not tell it to anyone.

“It does not matter anymore,” she said. “It was the war’s fault. It made everyone beasts.”

That day, when Saba was late, her sisters-in-law warned their mother-in-law. They heard the gunshots but no one had noticed. Then, noticing the darkness, the women went down to look for her.

When they were got closer they understood, hearing all the heartbreaking screams that came from the courtyard. They saw the red snow that sometimes changes color underneath the dusk. Saba, her mother, and her two sisters-in-law screamed, throwing themselves from one corpse to another. They had faces bleeding from scratches. The three dead brothers still laid on the snow. The night brought a wind not much colder.

From that moment Saba always wore black clothing. Even the handkerchief on her head was black. She did not allow anyone to sing at a wedding in the family. Except at her only son’s wedding.

* * * * *

But then life ropes you back in, it carries over with its little daily things and with the cries of children. Saba knew

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¹⁹ Neo-fascist political party in Italy. “Sito Ufficiale Del Fronte Nazionale.” *Sito Ufficiale - Fronte Nazionale*, www.frontenazionale.org/.

her destiny well. Sometimes turning between the stones of the tomb of her dear family she spoke alone. She used to say that death has many unknown roads and that is death's right, like it is our duty to try to give our dead silence and peace. But in this silence she had found until her own death, to walk every day on the street that brought her to them. She had all the time she needed to prepare.

So life began after the war. Destroyed houses were rebuilt and the dead received marble headstones. This time it was different from other wars. Saba realized that she had stayed on the right side. The neighbors that maybe did not want to mix themselves, because "the wars come and go; it is better to do your business," were considered enemies. On this point Saba harbored some doubts: but what enemies? She knew them since she was born... then she thought and rethought, and she came to understand one thing: this time, the after-war period would last forever.

The war comes, she thought, and you find yourself in the middle without wanting it. Afterwards, there are those who remain on one side and others who stay on the other side. Maybe because of random choices or for reasons that had worth only in that moment. But it is hard to explain anything about things past, it is not important that you were thrown from one side to follow your oldest brother or favorite cousin.

Saba had never read *The Capital*²⁰ and she did not even know what communism was. But she was a communist nonetheless. No one cared about the word.

"Communists" were those who fought or lost their loved ones in the war against Nazi fascism, they had explained to her. Period.

Then, even if she did not understand, slowly, slowly she began to like this thing for other, simpler reasons.

* * * * *

Saba found herself more than thirty years old in the fifties. They gave her husband a job maintaining

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²⁰ Otherwise known as "Das Kapital," Karl Marx's most famous work speaks about the main tenets of Marxism. "Das Kapital" was published in 1867. "Capital Volume I." *Marxists*, www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/download/pdf/Capital-Volume-I.pdf.

the municipality. Even if, as always, he was in company of the *grappa*,²¹ his paycheck came home intact.

“Tomorrow I am going to have a little chat with the secretary of the party,” said Saba. And her husband became like a little lamb. Today one would say that she was blackmailing him. But because of this, women in his village blackmailed him for his whole life.

In those years Saba found a job outside of the house as a dressmaker in the cooperative, and she also began to bring a paycheck home. It had never happened before in those parts of the world that a woman would touch the money with her own hands. Saba, and her friends, not only touched money but they even spent it. In the village they had opened many businesses. It was no longer necessary that the mother-in-law had to go into the city to buy things for her daughters- and sons-in-law. And no one could send a woman back to her father without her children if she disobeyed her husband: it was the husband who risked a bad ending if he tried to drive her away.

“Patriarchal,” the women yelled at their husbands. “A man filled with residue of the past, unworthy of creating a new society.”

In the end it did not matter much what the “husband-masters” were called; the point was that the children came from the women and no one felt threatened anymore.

Saba went to night-school with her friends. Sometimes she even brought the children, who fell asleep around her while she read alone on the board: “The woman: the force of a revolution.”

Between one slogan and another she finished middle school, but for her by now they were much more than slogans.

* * * * *

After the birth of her fifth child, at thirty-seven years old, Saba stopped sleeping with her husband. She went to sleep with her children. Two of them were by now married, her last pregnancy coincided with the first pregnancy of her firstborn.

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Saba was living the best years of her life. Her childhood was spent in a big family filled with many women. There was not time to give one daughter away in marriage that the next was

²¹ Grappa is an Italian liqueur that is grape based. It is usually 35-60% alcohol content. “History of Grappa.” *Life in Italy*, 22 Mar. 2019, www.lifeinitaly.com/wines/history-of-grappa.

already at marriage age. You know, the sooner they go, the better. The girls are like glass; if you break them, it is not useful to try to glue the pieces back together. Like this, before they shatter, shattering most of all the honor of the family, the family found a husband for them while they were young enough. Then, for some of them it went well and for some of them it went badly. Most of the time it was a question of luck. For the rest, wasn't it also like this in marriages based on love?

Now for Saba, after many labors, a point had arrived in which things simply were what they seemed to be. She worked, she sent her children to school, she had a house without a numerous tribe of her husband's family. She had many friends that came and went from her dress shop with clothes newly stitched by her. You could say in five words that she was finally living; she was the master of her own life.

Part One, Chapter Nine

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One day, in a meeting of the cooperative, the secretary of the party spoke about the opening of a big "Magazzino Popolare"²² in the village center. Everyone together had to choose a shop assistant. After different discarded hypotheses, Saba raised her hand and said, "Lisa, I propose Lisa. She studied and knows how to do the bills, she is well-mannered and nice..."

The secretary of the party looked at Saba very perplexed. Was she drunk in the brain? An interned foreigner to be re-educated, to sell at the "Ma-Po?"²³ What if she steals? What if she engages in propaganda with the farmers during work?

"If she tries to steal, we will fire her immediately," said Saba. "Where do you want her to escape from this mountain? And regarding the question of propaganda, poor girl, she was screwed by love, I think she does not even understand our affairs."

The secretary of the party convinced himself and at the end Lisa was given the position of Secretary.

²² Department store

²³ Abbreviation for "Magazzino Popolare"

Lisa was Italian and her husband Wilfred was Austrian. They brought them from the capital on an afternoon in the spring. Everyone in the village had helped at their arrival. These situations were not a new thing for anyone. They were housed in abandoned ruins, close to Saba's home.

She was the first of the neighbors to visit them, Saba. She made a dessert, a *revania*,²⁴ and one afternoon she knocked on their door with the baking tin in hand.

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"I came to visit, I know that you do not know anyone yet..."

They remained with open mouths. Then they let her enter. When Saba got up to return home it was already dark.

* * * * *

Lisa arrived in Albania with her first husband, an Italian engineer, in 1930. Then he died in a traffic accident: and to think that he came to Albania to build the roads. Lisa, once a widow, decided to remain anyways in Albania with her two small children. It was already the golden times which are praised: "Hurrah Vittorio Emanuele,²⁵ King of Italy and Albania!" During the war she was hopelessly in love with Wilfred, an Austrian who arrived in Albania right after the invasion of Poland in September of 1939.²⁶ Maybe he was an outcast of the Reich,²⁷ who in order to vacate the frontier had to conceal his political motivation, with the consequence of making himself suspect to some counterparts. They got married and they survived the war.

In 1945, before the Iron Curtain,²⁸ the government had offered Lisa an opportunity to leave Albania to return to Italy. She wanted to, but only with her new husband. No, they said, she

²⁴ An Albanian lemon and orange sponge cake. Athan, Lynn Livanos. "How to Make Revani." *The Spruce Eats*, TheSpruceEats, 29 Mar. 2018, www.thespruceeats.com/revani-cake-with-orange-syrup-1705281.

²⁵ Vittorio Emmanuel was the king of Italy from 1900 to 1946. He also held thrones in Ethiopia and Albania. During his reign, Italy was involved in two world wars and also experienced the rise and fall of Fascism. Britannica, The Editors of Encyclopaedia. "Victor Emmanuel II." *Encyclopædia Britannica*, Encyclopædia Britannica, Inc., 10 Mar. 2019, www.britannica.com/biography/Victor-Emmanuel-II.

²⁶ Germany invaded Poland in 1939, justifying their actions by claiming that Poland had been planning an attack on Germany. The Polish army was defeated weeks after the invasion. "Invasion of Poland, Fall 1939." *United States Holocaust Memorial Museum*, United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/article/invasion-of-poland-fall-1939.

²⁷ "Reich" is a German word meaning the 'realm.' "Reich | Definition of Reich in English by Oxford Dictionaries." *Oxford Dictionaries | English*, Oxford Dictionaries, en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/reich.

²⁸ The "Iron Curtain" characterized the boundary that divided Europe into two different areas at the end of World War II until the end of the Cold War. Britannica, The Editors of Encyclopaedia. "Iron Curtain." *Encyclopædia Britannica*, Encyclopædia Britannica, Inc., 26 Sept. 2018, www.britannica.com/event/Iron-Curtain.

was able to go to Italy with her children, but he was not allowed to leave Albania. Lisa had gone around to all of the offices of the Foreign Affairs department and then the Central Committee of the party, but they were not helpful: Wilfred had to remain in Albania. Who knows why. It was said by everyone: that he had been a spy for the Anglo-Americans, that he was a spy for the advanced Germans in Albania to find Jews! But the truth was never known. Like this in the end Lisa did not want to leave Albania without her beloved Wilfred. But not being completely unprepared, she contacted her family and she sent her children to Italy. She thought: you never know what if this country would remain closed forever?

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Even if she did not believe in total closure; in the end, she thought, sooner or later they would give Wilfred a visa and they would go together. How can they close a country? It is not like a business. Dear Lisa, sweet Lisa, sad Lisa did not know that even a country could remain closed like a business. Just like when the children of a landlord, after his death, not yet knowing what to do with the business, pull down the *portcullis*²⁹ for the time being. Then when they could not reach an agreement the *portcullis* would stay down forever. Forever or almost. Ruining like this the things that were the most dear to their late father. After, all that remains is the smell of mold mixed with that bitterness of memories inhabited only by some rats trapped inside. Forever.

Wilfred got the visa to leave Albania in 1992, with Lisa. But they were two visas with different destinations: him for Austria and her for Italy. Lisa wanted to see her children again after a good forty-seven years, and Wilfred did not want to face another migration. He only wanted to die in his homeland.

Lisa and Wilfred would remain until that moment in Saba's country. Inside that half destroyed house that had the name "house of the enemy."

A home destined to house other families coming from the capital, one of them composed of a mother with two children. Beautiful. Persecuted for prostitution. Prostitution meant many things, the girls found the way to have quite a lot of fun even in this village filled with stones. And with men.

²⁹ A heavy, vertically closing gate. "Portcullis." *Merriam-Webster*, Merriam-Webster, www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/portcullis.

The other family instead was huge. Grandfather, grandmother, father with a wife and two children. All from the capital. The elder was a member of the party, from the government, but then, as Saba said, “he fell from the fig tree.” He had done something big on top, and they had sent him to the socialist village to re-educate himself. They had to till the soil, while the children went to school. In conclusion, the thing that Saba and the other inhabitants of the country did even

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without being persecuted. But the difference was that Saba was born in this condition; those from the capital were not.

* * * * *

The friendship between Lisa and Saba lasted more than forty years. They shared recipes, they made rugs into the frame, and sometimes Saba brought her to her two sisters because they read the coffee grounds.

“Look, look well,” she said to her sister Esma. “Is there some opening to the outside world? This poor woman was screwed by a man, she has not seen her children in years...”

When someone made note to Saba that the opening that she looked for in the coffee grounds was against the principle of the party, she responded, “I do not understand anything about politics, but this does not cause any harm to anyone. How could Lisa be the enemy of anyone, Lisa who is not able to even kill a hen? She wants to go to her children, that is all.”

Saba realized that people like Lisa were paying unjustly. In the end she thought that every system had its weaknesses. Lisa was proof of this, but like they said in the country, with the dry grass burns also the green grass. The best years of Lisa’s life burned like the green grass far from her daughters and from her rich family selling shoddy fabrics and poisons for the parasites to the farmers.

Part One, Chapter Ten

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Saba, her gaze towards village center, folded dry laundry in the courtyard, just as her endless days folded themselves, lost in the clouds over the near forest. And also lost in the usual things.

Her sisters arrive today. This was a dear habit; she could not wait.

These sweet afternoons were drunk on the words that came from infancy and shook the hearts of everyone.

They sat around the fire, on the *qilin*, and opened their sessions.

* * * * *

When the four sisters had their gatherings, seeing them all together was a laugh. One was crazier than the other. Their extravagance was striking and, to say everything, their eccentricity. Afrodita rode the bus that stopped in the central square of Kaltra. All of the village watched. Between the hairstyles and clothes worn by Afrodita and the bizarre umbrellas with which Esma split the air, how could they pass by unnoticed?

Bedena instead went to this appointment hoping to be noticed as little as possible. She did not die for the desire to be there but she could not miss it. At least in the eyes of the village: that is to say, in her own eyes.

Bedena took everything seriously. She remembered the bites that Saba gave her when she was getting her first teeth and still claims some extra fabrics that poor Esma had had as a dowry.

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“Friends you choose, relatives no. What can you do?” Saba said to her friends.

“You see,” Bedena said to her friends who sometimes went to get coffee with her, “dogs and pigs enter into my sister’s house, but I never get an invitation.”

When they told Saba about Bedena’s words, she smiled.

“My house is open to everyone, whoever wants can come visit me. But I will not act like a *temena*³⁰ for anyone. Once, a long time ago, when I was another Saba, I spent my days being a *temena* to my mother-in-law, to my brothers-in-law, and to my husband. That time then is over, that Saba is dead.” And like this she ended the discussion.

* * * * *

³⁰ Ibrahimini notes that *temena* means someone who has a subservient attitude and is extremely respectful. In this context *temena* is similar to a slave.

Esma and Afrodita had arrived a while ago. But today they still did not see Bedena. When the other two asked about her, Saba raised her shoulders. “Apparently, peace in this family is just a dream.”

No one replied. However, everyone knew about Bedena’s oddities.

But after a little while, Bedena arrived, like a deceiving rain that beats against the windows of the heart in July. She opened the door and before saying hello to her sisters sitting around the *qilim*, she looked at Saba and said, “good, my sister, good. It is time that they also get to know you for who you are.”

“This one,” she continued looking at Esma and Afrodita, “put Lisa at the Ma-Po in Kaltra, Lisa the Italian. Poor girl, she was not able to work in the fields along with the others...Lisa with her delicate skin is not like us who were born farmers. Now she has been saved, thanks to my sister. What can you do, in this life some are from their mother and some are from their stepmother. I, her sister, am from a stepmother! May the milk that we drank together become *haram*³¹ for you!”

The two other sisters did not understand much. Afrodita
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has refused to understand more for years and Esma, like the airhead she was, did not even listen to Bedena’s words.

“Come on,” Saba said mildly without considering those heavy curses, “don’t get angry, you did not expect me to suggest you. You are my sister, how would this have looked in front of the others? And then you did not even go to school...”

“At least you could have been be quiet, do you understand? You should have been quiet. Why did you think of Lisa? No normal person would have thought of having the Italian³² sell in our business. Which one of our friends is more educated than me? Everyone took the same evening courses, except the Italian... and you, of course. But let us put aside your studies; after all, you went there mainly to bring lunch to our poor brother, if not who would have made you go to school...”

³¹ “Haram” is an Arabic word meaning forbidden. It is often used to describe a sinful action or any action that is prohibited by Allah and is also one of five Islamic commandments that define the morality of human action.

“Haram.” *Oxford Islamic Studies Online*, www.oxfordislamicstudies.com/article/opr/t125/e808.

³² In the text, Ibrahim uses the word *peppina* to mean the Italian.

Esma carefully fixed her lipstick, watching in the silver mirror which she had pulled out of her black leather bag. It was always like this. She arrived before the others with her summer or winter umbrella, depending on the season. Once she sat down, she opened her little bag and took her silver mirror and her lipstick holders out which were identical to the mirror. Then it was time for coffee, and Esma, who read the coffee grounds better than everyone, had to work hard to discover the fate of her sisters. One look at the side of the little mug and she would tell you everything, I mean everything: the future was written there and there was nothing that escaped her bright eyes. She was able to see weddings, pregnancies, deaths, every joy and every sorrow and the moment in which they would happen with perfect precision. And she was able to read the future of everyone except herself. But now it was not still time for coffee. Esma put her lipstick in her bag and asked Bedena, “what, did I miss anything? What are you doing there, standing? You won’t participate in our session today?”

“Here is another one. Did my mother give birth to all of the idiots of this world? You” said Bedena to Esma, “instead of turning around with that red mouth in front of the whole
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village, you better help your mother-in-law and your sisters-in-law...”

“Now it’s my turn,” Afrodita challenged. “I see that you have put everyone in their place, forgetting only me, right?”

“With you I won’t even waste my time. What do you know of our affairs? But I am done, I am leaving, I am leaving. Have fun, dear sisters, have fun without me. Not even the enemy does what your relatives do to you.”

Bedena left like she came. Today the session would be without her.

After a little while, Esma, Afrodita, and Saba got lost in chatter, forgetting about Bedena and the weeds that she is able to plant everywhere and with everyone.

“My Saba, how you have aged. Children give so much joy, yes, but it is also true that they send you to the Creator before you are due,” Afrodita always begins this way. Just like always: because she was the oldest sister, and she did not have children.

She joked around with her future, Saba thought, and now she found herself alone like an abandoned tombstone.

* * * * *

Afrodita got married early and she left her village early. She married a military doctor who had studied in Italy. Then he found a job at the military hospital in the capital. Afroditia followed him and suddenly became urban. Suddenly, she had forgotten about her childhood in the fields of maize and of the goats that she had to milk every night with her sisters. She had escaped that smell forever, like she had escaped the appearance of a farmer. She cut her long braids to have her hair in *carre*³³, as was in fashion. She burned her last bridge with the country girl.

“Women distinguish themselves from the men with their long hair,” Saba said when she saw her with short hair.

Saba went to visit her in the city only once. That was enough for her: Afroditia left her outside the door for

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hours. She waited for the dark to open it. This way the neighbors would have not been able to see that the farmer in black clothing with a handkerchief on her head was her sister.

Afrodita was a costume designer at the opera theater. She was always dressed fashionably. They came from the same stomach, she and Saba, but with different destinies. Saba, however, was never jealous.

“It is her life,” she said with a smile. “In the end, you live with neighbors, and sometimes also for your neighbors.”

The only thing that Saba did not forgive was the question of Afroditia’s children.

Afrodita maintained that in the early years of her marriage, her husband did not want children. He wanted her all to himself.

“Afrodita, there is time for children, we must enjoy life a little,” her husband said.

For Saba, her strange brother-in-law was French, because if he was Turkish he would have had children right away. If not, why was he even getting married? You marry a woman and take her home to fill her stomach [with a child]. For her, the Turkish way meant how traditionally it was done, how it was always done. Instead the French way was all new. Ways of

³³ A short, bob hairstyle.

life that were different from hers and thus incomprehensible. But not condemnable. She did not understand everyone there.

“What happiness can a woman find from her husband if not having children?”

It had been like this for her and for many in her country. “A woman without offspring is like a dry trunk without branches,” she concluded.

Her doctor brother-in-law had given his wife French medicine, never seen before [in Albania], in order to not have children. Mysterious concoctions so that she would not become pregnant. This happened for years; her husband would have sex with her when and how he wanted, and her stomach never grew.

Then, after some years, Afrodita was tired of the love stunts: the house was silent, the only sound was the groans of her husband, but those would not fill the emptiness always. Did they not have enough fun?

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She wanted a belly, like all of her sisters, like her friends. And more importantly she could not take any more questions from her neighbors or her acquaintances that disapprovingly asked, “still nothing?”

Because of this he stopped with those damned concoctions, but at that point, the success of the concoctions was already irreparable. Her husband continued to have sex with her, but her belly did not want to grow. They went to doctor visits and tried the remedies, but nothing. Saba always said that those things had “burned your eggs” inside your stomach, but really all of them! Like this that killer of a husband was able to continue to have fun without thinking. After all, the cross of not having children was bore more by Saba than Afrodita.

And then, looking at her well, Afrodita did not have that particular aura that is known of a mother. And it is not a question of having children, many women have it without giving birth, but Afrodita did not have it. Afrodita was happy, in the end maybe she was not upset at all, who knows that it was not the life she always wanted.

“It is the only life we have, my Afrodita, we have a right to live as we please,” Saba said.

Saba shocked everyone when she spoke like this. She had sacrificed her existence to do what others expected of her. But in the end maybe the life that she lived was the life she wanted

to live, and because of chance her chosen life coincided with conformism and tradition. Maybe it was only luck, but Saba saved herself, not considering her existence to be a punishment.

According to Saba, her life had traveled and continued to run across exactly the street that Allah had chosen for her. Saba invoked Allah often but more out of habit than out of faith. She had her theories, sometimes based on some historical truth and sometimes heard here and there and then reshuffled and served on the same plate. A plate of strange flavors, that continuously asks you what they have

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put inside, but you eat it without asking for other explanations.

Saba said that on the third day after our birth, Allah writes our destiny on the back of our necks: what we will do, what we will become, and most importantly, what we will never become.

“It was written like this”: with this routine she sometimes closed their discussions. But unfortunately only God could read what He had written.

“If only He would read it, then why write?” Afrodita asked just for clarification.

“To not confuse our destinies,” responded Saba. “To understand exactly the time of departure for everyone for the big journey, the one without return.”

“But if He changes His mind, the writing cannot be undone, and Allah remains trapped in His words. In conclusion, He makes you go because there is no way to change your ticket. Even Allah would understand that His own system has holes,” Afrodita continued to tease.

“I told you that He uses different writings, maybe yours has only the date, then He will decide the year of departure on the spot. But if you continue to annoy us like this, it will not be hard for Him to find you the first free spot,” Saba concluded, fed up.

* * * * *

“Saba, my dear, how you have grown. Children give so much joy, yes, but it is also true that they send you to the Creator before you are due,” Afrodita said after Bedena had left, slamming the door.

“It is the only life we have, my Afrodita. We have the right to live as we please,” Saba responded. And soon after she added, “it was written like this.”

Part One, Chapter Eleven

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It was a wintery Sunday. The snow covered everything. White silhouettes were illuminated by the fire onto the white walls of the room. People were chatting by the fire and nothing more. Omer had to find a way to drink, but if he went to the basement they would have understood. Fuck everyone, he thought, at his age he still had to drink in hiding. Saba put more wood onto the fire. Then she stood up and went into the kitchen. She got the flour to make the dough for bread. Her cat slept under the table.

“Kitty, get closer to the fire,” she told her slowly.

The cat did not move. Saba lowered herself to take the cat in her arms. The cat was chilly. The cat by now was dead. Maybe because of the chill or because of old age.

“All of these years you have kept me company,” Saba breathed.

She returned to the room with the fire and addressed her husband, “I am going to bury the cat. She is dead.”

“It is snowing, leave her outside, you will do it tomorrow.”

“It will snow also tomorrow,” she replied. “And anyway all dead have a right to be buried.”

“Make a hole in the garden,” Omer said.

“Don’t even say that,” Saba responded. “Then I would not be able to walk there, thinking that she was underneath.”

“You must bury her somewhere,” Omer continued. “Maybe in the vegetable garden.”

“Like this the ground would become more fertile, and I would find her flavor in my potatoes. Crazy ideas.”

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Saba wrapped the cat in a towel embroidered with those designs. She told her children to make the bread, then she left. She took the shovel and headed towards the forest.

She began to shift the snow. She struck into the hard ground. She had frozen hands. Her husband should have come with her, she thought, instead of saying what to do.

She continued to dig the hole. Suddenly she felt the shovel hit a hard object. It could be a stone, at least it seemed like a stone from the sound. She bent down to look for it with her hands. She dug with her arms but what she pulled out was not a stone; it was a skull. She rested it next to the cat and returned to digging. She found the rest of the skull, but the skeleton was not there. It was not worth it to find out who it was, and why it was there. Even if she had found their identity, their fate would not change at all.

In the place of the skull she placed the cat. This way she returned another death to that piece of land. And this time intact. Then she took the skull and returned home. She hid it well inside the stable. Calmly she would think about what to do.

After a few days it stopped snowing. Life returned to its normal rhythms, and so did Saba. She worried about what to do. If she took it to the authorities, that poor skull would never find peace. Maybe it was bad to take it from where it was. The idea to take it to the police did not convince her; they would put it on some shelf and forget it in an office for years. She could ask someone's opinion. But not her friends. After a few hours the whole village would know. She did not want to tell her children either. The thought that their mother had brought a skull close to the house would make them not be able to sleep.

I am going to the imam³⁴. He will know what to tell me, she thought. Like this, with the skull inside her shopping basket, she went to find the imam. Truthfully, he was an ex-imam who now worked in the agricultural cooperative. And they were family; the imam, in his first marriage, had married Omer's sister, Adile. Then he got involved in the usual affairs in which men who do not know

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how to close the zippers on their pants put themselves. And without having time to think he found himself in the house of a second wife. The second wife was fertile like the first wife but

³⁴ "Imam" is a title of Islamic leadership. The imam usually leads worship in a mosque and among the Muslim community. Britannica, The Editors of Encyclopaedia. "Imam." *Encyclopædia Britannica*, Encyclopædia Britannica, Inc., 2 Apr. 2014, www.britannica.com/topic/imam.

not strong like her: her sixth birth killed her, leaving Adile to the role that had always been hers, with six more children to raise.

* * * * *

The imam was smoking close to the fire.

“Come, Saba, my sister-in-law, come. What do you bring in with this cold?” he said.

“Just to say hello,” Saba responded.

“If you did not come to say hello to me when I was taking care of Allah’s business, why would you come now that I am only taking care of my business. Spit out the question that afflicts your mind, my Saba.”

“Ali imam, I do not care at all about your affairs or those of Allah. But you know everything that one ought to know, because you have seen the world and because you have read the books written by men or by the one who is in the sky.”

Saba opened the basket and pulled out the skull. Ali imam looked at her without moving.

“What do you have to say about this?” Saba asked. “It was buried in the woods close to my house. Without the rest of the skeleton. I do not know why I took it, Ali imam. I made a mistake. But what do I do now? Should I take it to Trifon the policeman or not?”

“Are the living not enough for you, Saba, you have to even bother the dead?” he replied. “You have to leave it where you found it. If it was there, there is a reason for it.”

“Maybe it was there to be found by me, who knows,” Saba said.

“Many wars have been fought, we have had many famines, and many people disappeared without a trace. No one will know who it is, except Allah. Leave it with me, as soon as the weather is better I will bury it. This way I can sing the *suras*³⁵,” Ali imam said.

Then he took the skull, he looked at it well and said, “poor man, you have been through so much and you must be still going through a lot. Who knows what you did in the world of the living to not find peace

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³⁵ “Sura,” otherwise known as Surah, is the name for a chapter of the Quran. The chapter is comprised of Medinan and Meccan sections. Britannica, The Editors of Encyclopaedia. “Surah.” *Encyclopædia Britannica*, Encyclopædia Britannica, Inc., 17 Sept. 2013, www.britannica.com/topic/surah.

among the dead. You will be suspended in eternity, not even hell wanted you.” Ali imam was good at prophecies. He put the skull in the chest in which he kept his Quran.

Saba returned home without having understood many of his words. But in the meantime she did not have to decide anything anymore. Now she could begin crying calmly for her cat.

Part One, Chapter Twelve

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Esma married a good man who fought in the army ranks of the national liberation. At the end of the war he stayed in the capital and she in Kaltra, waiting to see each other again. They had two small children.

Esma was blonde, skinny, and had the delicate air of all of the Buronja sisters, the air that in the language of the village translated as “malaticcia” (“unhealthy”). And she would not make efforts to please her mother-in-law and her husband’s; for her, the love of her husband was enough. She was happy just like this.

Esma was lazy, and slow. She woke up late and, while her mother-in-law and sisters-in-law broke their backs to finish the domestic work before the men came home, she spent her hours giving her children long braids and brushing her blonde hair under the sun.

She came out of her room at lunchtime, dressed in clothes never seen in the village, her mouth red like fire and nails painted in red the same as her mouth. Smiling, she sat herself at the table and conversed. She was surprised by the rude responses.

“But who does she think she is?” said her sisters-in-law. “Does she think that we are her servants because of the money her husband sends us?”

Esma did not even think about the money that her husband sent to the family, she would have behaved in the same way even if there had not been that “money.” In the end the only thing that interested her was the arrival of her husband at the end of every month. Esma’s days passed by like this: she

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took care of her looks, then, in the afternoon, she went to visit her mother. She crossed through the center of the village in her newly sewn clothes with fabrics that came from the capital and with an open umbrella always in her hand. During the summer the scorching sun that even burned the stones would have ruined her white skin, and during the winter it either rained or snowed. French umbrellas like this were never before seen in the town. Like it had never before been seen a husband that bought in person so many gifts for his wife. But was it not the task of the mother-in-law to buy presents for her daughters? Esma did not pay much attention to this chatter; she went straight down the street.

When the end of the month came near, she seemed even more out of this world and time. She began to prepare for the event two days before his arrival. She got fresh eggs from the hen-house and with the egg whites she made a type of wax that she used on her whole body.

When her body was clean from every little imperfection, which women hate, she prepared a mask with the egg yolk, fresh cream and a spoonful of wildflower honey. She smeared it over all of her skin and left it laying on her for a little. She put olive oil on her hair first to soften it, then she washed it with chamomile to make it bright. Then she washed the children, who dressed in their best Sunday clothes, and she gave them two braids tied on top of their heads like princesses and they went down to wait for the bus.

Esma, Esma, do not go by like this,
You make dead rise up
And you make the living die.

The men of the village sang to her like this with their eyes red from the *raki*³⁶.

But Esma passed by them anyways. All things considered, when she went to the cemetery to find her brother, she had never seen a dead person who raised themselves out of the tomb to look at her. These songs were for those poor people that put *raki* to their mouths.

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³⁶ “Raki” is a sweetened, anise flavored liqueur that is popular in Turkey, Albania, and Greece. “Turkish National Drink, Raki.” *Turkish National Drink, Raki*, raki.com/history-of-raki/.

When the bus arrived and she saw her man come down, she threw herself on him like a cat in heat, without caring about what those behind her had said. Embracing with the two children in the middle, they returned home. For the whole dinner she thought about what would happen after. Her eyes gleamed, her happiness was evident. Her sisters-in-law were unable to understand her. For them, to close themselves in the room with their husbands and hurry up certain things was hell. But Esma was a little like the men: she felt pleasure. What a strange woman.

The morning after, Esma did not wake up late like usual. She woke up before her husband and ran into the kitchen to prepare breakfast with her hands. She made the dough for *petulle*³⁷ not with yeast like the other women, but with yogurt and fresh eggs. If not, how would those pancakes made of flour, water and yeast taste?

She liked to serve him in bed and after close the door again. It was shameless that she did not stop at anything, her sisters-in-law said. Not even the looks filled with disapproval from her mother-in-law bothered her. Her mother-in-law said that Esma, with her tricks and her magic, had transformed her son's brain into the brain of a donkey. Yes, that colonel of her son, who gave orders to a whole battalion, he understood nothing in front of the pussy hairs of her daughter-in-law. It was not made of gold!

* * * * *

On a beautiful morning, while the colonel was about to go down to Osman to chat with the men, the happy life of Esma was about to end. Esma did not know it yet, and she did not read it in her coffee grounds.

The colonel left their house, and in the beginning he did not see anything strange. Sheets of paper covered the street that he had to follow to the bar, but this was a normal thing. During the war the partisans spread the news this way for the people, and also after the war this form of communication was used.

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³⁷ An Albanian pastry that is similar to a donut or a pancake.

He thought that they had approved some reforms and he did not even bend to collect one. He noticed that everyone in the village saluted him in a strange way but did not take too much notice. It was because he came from the capital, he thought.

Arriving at the bar he saw the same look in the eyes of the other men, a displeased look, almost pitiable.

“But what do they all have this morning?” he thought.

He ordered a coffee with *raki* and began to ask about the news in the village. One of his childhood friends stood up and, without saying anything, held in front of his eyes one of the “letters” that paved the street to the bar.

Dear colonel,

It is true that the husband is the last to know, but we who are honest people, we feel that out of charity we must tell you that your wife does not carry herself like a true, honest woman. Colonel, you fought during the war for all of us and now you are there, in the government, to work and to not sleep at night because you are thinking about the future of our country. To warn you that your wife is one of little goodness is the least our village can do. You, colonel, do not deserve to be a cuckold! To not speak about your poor children, what will happen to them with such a mother?

The colonel was not able to understand the contents of this absurd letter. He was shocked. How could his beautiful Esma make him a cuckold? Mixed with accusations of *kurveria*³⁸? He could believe himself to be dead already, but not that Esma had cheated on him. This was impossible.

He returned home under the gaze of the village. Everyone had read the letter and now waited to hear the shots. But of course he will kill her, they thought, for one thing the colonel has are balls.

³⁸ An Albanian word that translates as sexual immorality or fornication.

Arriving home, he found Esma in the courtyard, unaware of everything, combing her blonde hair. He felt a strain on his heart: what must he do, what must he say? The point is that he did not believe the letter. But he knew that it was not important what he believed. The situation is in the public domain and they waited for a strong reaction.

Strangely, her sisters-in-law had a glowing look.

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They finished off their never ending chores with joy. The mother was drinking her third coffee without sugar. What could be more bitter than the fate of her son?

The colonel took Esma by hand and took her into their room sweetly, the opposite of what her sisters-in-law imagined. For better or for worse, he remained a gentleman. Once inside, he put the letter in front of Esma's eyes. She smiled, a sweet, tender smile, the smile that he would carry with himself for his whole life.

"You know that I do not know how to read," Esma said with a shaking voice. "But I promise you that once we are in the capital I will learn, I will go to literacy classes..."

Poor Esma, she could not imagine what was written in that letter.

There was no need to be cleared of the accusations. He saw her crazy love for her husband in her face, in her smile, in her every movement.

The colonel then closed himself in the room with his mother, and when he came out of there his face was the same color as the ground. Even if she has always been out of this world, this time Esma understood everything. Understood and agreed: her love for him was this big. He did not say a single word, but if the thing that was about to happen would save the honor of her beloved, she would willingly sacrifice herself.

* * * * *

"May you go behind the sun," one of her sisters-in-law murmured when Esma came out of the room with her suitcases ready.

At dusk the whole village went down towards Esma's mother, Meliha's house. He walked in front of her with her suitcase in hand, she followed him with her head lowered, how she would even follow him to hell.

In front of the door he stopped himself. He placed the suitcase on the ground and lit a cigarette.

“Esma,” he said with a voice carried by the wind from the desert. “Man is weak, weak like the grass under our

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feet. And our mind is a forest, a forest full of hidden corpses. My sweet Esma, who is going, who remains, and who returns. But I have to do it, Esma, what will I do without you?”

He began to cry like a baby. Pouring. She left him to let it out, then she gave him her handkerchief. Under the angelic light of dusk, she savoured for the first and last time the saltiness of his tears and soon after he ran to drown his sadness in the vapors of *raki*.

Part One, Chapter Thirteen

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Adile, Omer’s sister, had found herself sharing everything she had with her rival, and above all her husband.

In the beginning she wanted to leave, to take her children and flee. Flee so that she did not have to see anymore the face of her unfaithful husband. And to think that the women of the village in the beginning of marriage envied her.

“Adile, lucky you for the husband you found. He understands what happens to us mere mortals and he understands also what is above us.”

But of course he understood everything. Everything, except that a married man does not become a pimp with inconsolable widows. But who could have imagined it? He, who used words and reason with everyone, even with two-year-old puppets, but when he went to unbutton his pants he had not invoked reason. These things mulled within Adile while she did work in the house.

She had a lot to do, Adile: too many children, too much work. She gave birth to six but she found herself being a mother to thirteen. The others were the children of the second wife of

Ali imam, who had been dead for some years. When she was alive they got along like two sisters. In silence they had made a deal: to look after the children without distinguishing from which belly they had come out. And to look after Ali imam, so that they did not find a third wife in the house. Even if according to the law polygamy was illegal, he could do as he had done for his second wife, who was not found on any documents. Ali imam registered the birth of the children of his second wife

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under the name of the first. Easy.

He had never thought about a second wife in the real sense of the word. Yes, yes it was fun in a joke with someone, but it was always about married women, he could certainly not afford a virgin. Just like that, however, he met his second wife: because he had an affair with her mother. Born by chance. When she became a widow, Ali imam went to make the honors for the dead.

That day Ali imam sat next to the fire. The sobbing widow arrived. She settled in front of him and began the cry for her dead. She put into verses their whole life and the qualities of her husband. To hear her, it seemed that she had had the best spouse on the earth. But these funeral lamentations were always like this. It was never said that the deceased beat his wife and children or that he got drunk on *grappa*.

While the widow listed the qualities of the dead, Ali imam looked down to nod, and saw. What did he see? Something that troubled him. In a hurry, the widow had forgotten to put on her underwear.

In the meantime, the widow had reached the physical qualities of the husband:

Without you for me it is hell

Red mouth and black moustache.

Hearing these last words, Ali imam said without thinking, "I see, I see with my eyes. And what a mouth, red like a rose."

The widow continued her cry undisturbed but then, left alone, she became aware of the words of Ali imam.

After the forty days of mourning, he went to find her. They chatted a little but then he understood that he made her uncomfortable.

“I thought much about your red mouth in these weeks,” he said.

“Too bad,” she responded to him.

“We’ll see,” Ali imam ended.

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Some days passed and they were already lovers.

He arrived at night when she had put the children to sleep. He took her on the hay inside the stable. During the summer he took her between the cobs of corn that were still not ripe. Sometimes even in the day, on the rocks warmed by the sun close to the river and under the trees swaying in the wind.

Their passion continued until the day in which the parents of her deceased husband arrived.

“The village talks,” they said. “Maybe it is better if we take the children. This way you can be a prostitute in peace.”

“My children have everything,” she said. “They will stay with me.”

“By hook or by crook we will take them,” they confirmed. “With a mother that has sex with the imam while her husband is still warm in the tomb, who would marry your children?”

Her brothers-in-law sat down. They did not intend to leave without her children.

“Gossips,” she defended herself. “It is not true.”

“It’s not true that the imam comes to find you day and night?”

“He does not come for me,” she said.

“Yes, it is for the good soul of our brother. He fucks his wife to make him peaceful in the afterlife,” dared one of them.

“He sings the funeral rites on the pussy of the widow,” another one worsened the load.

She blushed. They were being serious. She understood that from their vulgarity: otherwise they would not use these words in front of her, in front of the mother of their nephews.

She would find a way to save her children.

“He is in love with Neda. It is she he wants,” she said.

“Very well,” they responded. “They will get married Friday. Tell your imam we are not kidding.”

They left. She cried. “Forgive me, my daughter,

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forgive me. What did I do to you? Second wife of a married man, I ruined you.”

She cried and still cried. Then she got up, washed herself and made herself beautiful. In full daylight she went to knock at the imam’s door. He was at the table with his wife and children.

“We must speak,” she said.

“Speak,” his wife said, who had heard the voices in the village for six months. “Are the chats behind the bushes not enough for you?”

“Not in front of them,” the widow replied.

The imam nodded to the children who left disgruntled. She sat and she looked him in the eyes and in front of his wife and announced, “Friday you will marry my daughter Neda. My husband’s family could kill you. The honor of the family would be repaired.”

“I am already married,” he said.

“You must think first before doing certain things,” she replied without looking at him. “And then you will not be neither the first nor the last to have two women at home.”

“No one will ask me anything?” Adile intervened.

“Did your husband ask you anything when he came to my house to unlace my pants?” the widow responded while she left.

Adile remained speechless. She knew that her husband *portava a spasso l’uccello*³⁹, but she did not believe he would do so with a young girl. She thought about the widow, who in the

³⁹ An Italian saying that means her husband cheated on her with another woman.

end did not represent any danger to her. Instead, she would ease her life, lifting from her certain commitments. Instead, he got into trouble.

Friday, like decided, they celebrated the wedding. The girl softened Adile right away. She was lost, the poor girl, and she certainly did not seem burning with passion.

The following morning his now-first wife entered the newlyweds' bedroom and saw his second wife changing the sheets. They were speckled with blood.

She would be a mother to this girl, Adile decided.

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Maybe because she felt that they shared a destiny: one tricked by her husband and one by her mother. And she thought that the second deceit was very much worse.

The two women never had a fight, but the first wife did not accept that the mother of the second wife came to visit.

"Deceitful heart," Adile said.

"She is the only mother I have," Neda responded.

The second wife died during her sixth birth, after only a few months of being pregnant. The baby survived, and the first wife loved him like he was her own. She became the mother of thirteen children who all took her name on their birth certificates.

* * * * *

"Why are you late?" Adile asked her husband one day.

"I went to sing the funeral rites."

"They did not need your funeral rites before, imagine now that the religion is prohibited," she said.

"I was at the cemetery," he responded. "To find my wife."

"And maybe her mother also," the woman said ironically.

But he did not pay attention to anything she said. He was used to it. The story about the funeral rites for his buried wife instead were true. He often went to the cemetery; he felt guilty for the girl who ended up as a bride to repair the damages of her mother.

* * * * *

Adile said nothing on the day in which she saw the skull by chance. It really did not interest her.

Then she discovered her husband sitting on the chest with the skull in hand one afternoon.

“It is your destiny to not find peace, eh?” Ali imam said. “Maybe in the other life you were happy and now you must pay. Happiness costs, costs a lot, and only those who have balls accept that. This is why the world is full of unhappiness, in the afterlife they won’t.”

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She remained silent. He was talking to the skull! He was crazy, or maybe not, maybe the skull belonged to someone he knew. A dear person. The second wife! No, he is speaking about balls, look... it is the skull of her mother. She had balls... she even dumped her daughter to save herself. Even if she said she did that in order to not make her other children orphans. That *kurva*⁴⁰ did not leave her husband in peace even in death.

The day after, as soon as he left the house, Adile opened the chest and found the skull. She lit the fire and without hesitating she threw the skull in.

“I should have done this to you when you were alive, *kurva*,” she said. “Unfortunately, you don’t feel pain, but that’s okay. But your body will be agitated eternally, in the tomb trying to find the head that is missing. You will never have peace!”

Then she resumed life without thinking about it anymore. A little while later the husband opened the chest. Not seeing the skull, he asked his wife.

“I burned your *kurva*,” she said, smiling. “I should have burned her alive, but I didn’t have the balls. Now I am happy.”

“Poor skull,” he replied. “I said that it was not over. It had to still pay.”

“Already paid,” she smiled, without understanding that the words of her husband referred to another. He did not explain it to her. For once he did not want to ruin her happiness.

⁴⁰ An Albanian word that can be translated as whore or prostitute.

Part One, Chapter Fourteen

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At lunchtime Omer brought Saba one of the fliers distributed in the village. She never imagined that this story would end up like this. She read its contents and then smiled.

“Esma,” she said, “you think my sister Esma acts like a *kurva* with the drunks of Osman? Poor things, after all of the *raki* they drink they cannot even find their way home, let alone my sister’s graces!”

“They see certain things better with *raki*,” Omer said.

Ah, yes, certainly, he is the expert.

“Yes, they see better,” Saba responded, “but not with one like my sister. Even the stones knew how in love she was with the colonel. And then *kurveria* is not a thing that happens to our family. In our family there have been many women who were not in love with their husbands, but they never went to have fun with the alcoholics of Osman. And I am here wasting time telling you things that you already know...”

That night, while she was closing the common wooden door that opened to the street, Saba saw a thin figure which she knew well. She also saw a tall man close to her with a suitcase in hand and she understood everything. Her first thought went to Meliha: my poor mother, the sorrows do not end for her. But right after she thought about the destroyed life of her sister.

She took off her apron which she had over her black skirt and began to walk towards Esma’s house.

The door was already open. She entered without calling to

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anyone. She heard the voices that came from the courtyard, subtle voices interrupted by sobs and moans.

On the three steps of the door to the launderette she saw the braids of her nieces. Bubi had her head in the lap of Delfina, who stroked her head and told her, “Mom will come back, you

will see that Mom will come back. She loved us too much to leave us here. You will see that she will come back tomorrow. Mom will take us away with her.”

But their mom would never come back. Because she really did love them too much, so much so that she would not take them away with her.

The morning after Esma’s repudiation, Bedena ran to Saba’s house. You could tell that she was worried. While Saba was making coffee, Bedena asks if she had known about the cascading calamity upon their mother.

“She will never have peace until she closes her eyes once and for all,” Bedena said.

“What can she do?” Saba cut shortly. “There are troubles for the living.”

“Yes, I know, but here philosophy is not helpful,” Bedena said. “Do you realize how this tragedy will hurt our mother? It is not like a person who died because Allah decided, or someone who falls while walking and breaks their legs. This is a question of honor, the good name our family remains only a memory. What do I have to endure, my poor children...”

“Esma’s poor children, I do not think that your children will suffer because their aunt has been abandoned by her husband.”

“Of course they will suffer, in which world do you live in? Every time that someone will be interested in marrying them they will think well before doing it. No, the mothers will say, are we crazy to bring home girls that come from a family mixed with questions of *kurveria*? The sister of that woman there, who spent her days brushing her hair in the courtyard and her nights who knows where, will become my mother-in-law?

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The granddaughter of that abandoned *kurva* will be the mother of my nephews? Open heaven, my children will remain spinsters, spinsters for life!”

Saba did not even have the strength to respond to this flood of words. Bedena, like always, believed she was the center of the universe. And to think that they came out of the same belly and they were nourished by the same breast. It is really true that the thorns are also born from the rose. Her sister would never change. Only a few days had passed since the story about Bedena’s neighbor, Tana.

* * * * *

A *kulak*⁴¹ lived close to Bedena's home. She said this with contempt, like the word *kulak* indicated an incurable and disgusting sickness. When she pronounced it she closed her eyes, and her mouth made the movement that it would make when it was disgusted or nauseated by something.

Her poor neighbor, he lost all of his possessions but, like you say, if one knows that they are about to die they dig their own tomb with their hands.

The wife of this *kulak*, Tana, took her mule to graze one day. She pulled the rope, but the mule wanted none of it. She spoke meanly to it, but the mule did nothing.

Bedena, who heard the curses, went out to see what was happening.

When she tried to grab the rope to help Tana, Bedena went pale. On the reddish mane of the mule hung many medals that Tana's husband, a former partisan, got from the Communist party right after the war, before he became a *kulak*. Other medals were given to their children who, with their work as volunteers, contributed to "making the mountains and woods fertile like the valleys," just as the first Secretary of the Central Committee of the party, Enver Hoxha⁴², said.

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The decorated mule, who was possibly afraid of the furious eyes of Bedena, began to move.

"But are you out of your mind? The medals of the party on the mule?" Bedena attacked Tana.

"He deserves them all, poor boy, he works like a mule." Tana laughed at her joke. "If he continues to work like this, soon he can file to become a communist. I see that in our family no one has yet become one, ah, ah, ah." And Tana went away.

Evidently, Bedena thought, Tana was really amused to decorate the mule like this and went straight to the center of the village.

⁴¹ "Kulak" is a Russian word that was used to talk about wealthy peasants who were able to own their own land and employ others. This class of people in Albania was essentially wiped out after the rise of communism in the country. United Nations. "Albania: Information on Kulaks (1940-Present)." *Refworld*, www.refworld.org/docid/3ae6ac390.html.

⁴² Enver Hoxha was an Albanian communist politician who was the head of state for Albania from 1944 until he died in 1985. "Albania and Enver Hoxha's Legacy." *OpenDemocracy*, www.opendemocracy.net/en/albania-and-enver-hoxhas-legacy/.

After a few days, the event seemed forgotten. The secretary of the party had not said anything, even if he knew all about it. He usually gave no importance to these things; he was a man of few words and he preferred to value the work of the people rather than gossip. Maybe he also enjoyed Tana's joke.

Bedena waited a few days, then she exploded at a meeting. They did the meeting of the party with the masses, the party sometimes did not have secrets, only sometimes.

After the secretary had his opening discussion, Bedena stood and complained about a grave thing happening in the village, a thing that the enemies of the revolution, imperialists, capitalists, and their like would rejoice. Apparently, all of these categories that Bedena named, scattered around the world where they were, already knew that Tana, the wife of a farmer on a lonely mountain, had attached the awards given by the party to the mane of a mule, they had lost sleep. Because it was clear that Tana and her mule gave the first signs that communism in Albania was in danger...

This was Bedena's discussion. She wanted serious measures so that these attacks against the party, the country, and the whole socialist camp would never continue!

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Tana was punished. Saba helped at the meeting, then left with her head lowered. She was ashamed of Bedena. And to think that in her life she had been through so much, but had never been ashamed of anyone. When things happened, she accepted them thinking that it was destiny, or Allah, or someone in hell for them, that decided everything. But Bedena's stories often did not have to do with destiny, and not even with Allah.

Part One, Chapter Fifteen

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Meliha had not heard from Saba in days, since Esma had been sent away by her husband. Saba stopped by to see how her sister was. She spoke with her for a while. They spoke about

love that did not get lost like this, from the night until the morning, about the children that still needed her, even if only for doing their braids everyday, about destiny that gives and takes from you without any forewarning, and above all about the fortune which she had had. Hadn't she been lucky to experience real love? Some did not experience it in their whole life. You know, there is not a precise rule for the distribution of love. She had had her portion, and she could survive with this.

Then Saba did not see her anymore. Everyone had the right to feel true pain to their core at their own pace. She would return to her sister when she was feeling calmer.

A week had not yet passed when her mother sent for someone to go find her. Not to console their poor sister. Esma had not even noticed Saba's presence; in her suffering, she still had a long way to go, without the ability to change the past.

Meliha waited for Saba, seated on her armchair. The vines on her head, stripped of the season, were similar to her skinny face. Her gaze, like always, was elsewhere, towards the valley. In the valley there was everything that gave life and also housed death.

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Meliha began to speak, but she did not say a word about Esma. What was there to say still? They both had a certain familiarity with pain, and they both knew that words did not help.

"I am beginning to feel tired," Meliha said.

"Maybe it is the changing of the seasons, the old blood waits to be replaced with the new. That is why we need the spring," Saba said.

"I don't have time; the spring is late for me. I called you because there are things that I cannot do. I am not like I used to be. You must help me."

Saba listened in silence. From her mother's tone she understood that she was talking about something extremely important. If her mother had needed someone to hoe the vegetable garden, to collect the fruit, or to bring water from the fountain, she would not use these kind of words.

"Eh," Meliha said pointing to the cemetery. "Those there feel even the rains that quench the thirst of the earth and the wind on the branches of the cypresses, but for the rest I doubt it. It

is already difficult for men to guess things about women and their feelings when they are above the ground, let alone when they are under the ground.”

Silence. After a little Meliha added, “in all of these years every time that there was some news I went out to tell them it all. They had the right to know and we had the right to say what had happened. So we did not get lost. This way one day, when everyone will meet again, it will be like we had left them the day before. Like this death will understand that even if he took what he thought was his, nothing will ever totally belong to death.”

Saba listened. She already knew where her mother was headed.

“My Saba, now it is your turn. And do not ask me why it is you. You can even smile. You will tell me: and what is there to choose from?” Saba continued to be silent. She did not ask how to do it. These were things that you never asked. They just happened to you.

The mother and her child got coffee. They did not turn the cups

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to look at the grounds. Today the future was not of interest to either of them.

They observed the valley in silence. Until the darkness hid everything, alive and dead.

* * * * *

The morning after, Meliha, from her armchair, saw Saba walk down the path to the cemetery. Then she surrendered herself completely with the feeling that something would never end. That it would continue even without her, after her.

Saba instead had other feelings. Telling the dead everything about events of the family was always her mother’s job. This passing of traditions upset her. Passing traditions of this kind were always upsetting.

First she cleaned the dry leaves carried by the wind off of the tomb. The marble, oblivious to everything, shined under the autumn sun.

Saba did not know where to seat herself. They were all in a line: Sultana, the fathers, the brothers, the sister-in-law. She sat in the middle, in a spot where she could see everyone well. The eyes from the photos followed her. She did not want to look at their smiles; they confused her. Their smiles were not a smile of defiance. The smiles of defiance of those who have gone, but with tranquility, awaited the arrival of the others. Like part of the only possible destiny.

But she was there for a different reason. Her sister Esma was abandoned by her husband. And in a family these things were told to the dead. You could not hide them for long. Sooner or later they would come out.

Saba did not explain everything. Did she have to talk about only the abandonment or go into the details? Like the letter in which it was said that Esma was accused of *kurveria*. Even if Saba knew well that it was not true, the word alone upset her. And if it disturbed her, as a woman, and above all a living woman, nevermind their dead fathers and brothers. A woman of their family abandoned like a *kurva*? They would never find peace anymore in death. And Saba did not want this for them.

She decided to not tell them about the letter. They should just be

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happy to know everything; the particulars in their condition were nothing but a luxury. Her family was comprised of modest people, who were satisfied by the essentials. The essential here was knowing that Esma had been abandoned. Nothing more. According to Saba, the most important thing about the story was Esma's heartbreaking suffering. And they must all be in agreement about this, the living and the dead.

Her voice was uncertain in the beginning. How can verses that were simple like water explain her sister's pain? But as she continued she became more certain.

*The thing that will remain is her blind pain,
Skewered in the offal of the earth.
It will remain until the end of her deaf anxiety,
Wrapped in icy evening stars.*

In the end, Saba felt good. She felt in her place. From that day, until her death, she would be the one who would keep the dead informed about what happened to the living. And she did it her way, like always.

Part One, Chapter Sixteen

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After some time, something happened to Bedena that Saba thought was part of Allah's plan for her in order to make her sister pay for the evil she had inflicted on others.

"The hand of Allah is late but does not forget," Saba said, even if she was sorry for her poor nephew, who was without a nose at sixteen years old.

Her nephew was named Mysafir, and his destiny would make him become the barber of the village. It was decided at the time of Esma's abandonment by her husband. Maybe he could have gone to college, but he did not want to even think about that question. Without a nose it was already difficult for him to live in the village where he was born, nevermind in other places.

As soon as he left his business, he was followed by the children's choir of Kaltra:

*Noseless Mysafir,
Because of his neighbor's wife.*

The barber, Bedena's son and Saba's nephew, got used to these verses that changed with the seasons or with the creativity of the children in charge.

In the place of his nose, Mysafir had a white bandage that was always clean. And he wore a change purse that was the same color as the bandage.

* * * * *

He was sixteen years old. He went to school and in the afternoons he helped his mother in the vegetable garden. He brought water for the plants and vegetables. He pruned the trees and hoed the earth; he did everything that had to be

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done. On the other side of the fence sometimes the wife of one of his neighbors worked. She was a beautiful woman. She always helped her mother-in-law. Her husband never saw.

"I would never let my wife carry water," Mysafir said to his mother.

“Everyone speaks like this before getting married,” Bedena replied without raising her head.

One day Mysafir waited for his beautiful neighbor in front of the fountain. She said hello to him.

“Can I help you?” he asked her.

“It does not matter to me much, I know that I must do this work everyday, until I become a mother-in-law,” she said to him.

“Much time has to go by,” Mysafir concluded.

Another day he saw her in the courtyard while she was washing her hair in the sun. She had black hair. She did not notice, but he waited and watched her until she went back into the house. Then the woman came out again with a basket of dirty laundry. She headed towards the laundromat, a far 100 meters from home.

Mysafir climbed over the fence and followed her. He opened the door and as soon as he was inside he was covered with the steam that came from the aluminum basins in which she did the laundry. He got close to her and touched her black, polished hair.

“You are crazy,” she whispered. “You have to leave right away.”

But Mysafir did not let her speak. He closed her mouth with a kiss. With his hand he tried to raise her skirt. She was not wearing underwear. Mysafir was unable to understand anything else.

He placed her delicately on the dirty clothes scattered on the floor and unbuttoned his pants. She tried to get up, unconvinced. He snuck under her skirt and began to lick her, there. Then he threw her up, penetrating her. She did not have time to feel anything, the last thing she saw was the light that filled the room.

After a few minutes they both found themselves tied together with donkey’s rope.

“Let me go,” she was able to say. “I will return to my mother, no one will know that you are a cuckold.”

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“I a cuckold, and you a *kurva*. Was I not enough for you? You had to open your legs to a child who has not yet sprouted hairs...”

“I took her with force, it is not her fault,” Mysafir intervened.

“I saw her when she had him inside her, this *cagna*⁴³, I saw how she enjoyed it. I will make you stop wanting him.”

“What do you want to do?” she asked, alarmed. “Kill me! Do you not want to go to the party’s secretary?”

“I was not even thinking about that. That cuckold cannot even look after his wife, the whole party would fuck her. I will not kill you, *kurva*. But I will make sure that no one in this world would ever touch you.”

Her husband moved away and headed home. He returned to the laundromat running with a pair of scissors in his hand. He approached Mysafir. With shaking hands he pointed the scissors towards Mysafir’s nose. Mysafir sweat.

He heard the sound of the scissors cutting his flesh, like the sound of cutting fabric but a little harder. Mysafir screamed, watching his nose fall to the ground.

Her husband did not waste time. He put the scissors under the nose of his wife: another cut. The same sound like fabric.

The woman’s face was covered in blood. She screamed.

Mysafir’s mother, Bedena, arrived first.

“My baby, what did you do to my baby?”

“What did your baby do to my wife?” the husband responded, not bothered at all.

Bedena took the scissors and cut the rope. Shouting, she dragged her son to the doctor in the village.

The wife instead, with a hand on her face, bends down to try to find her nose. She did not even know who could help her, but she began to run to her parent’s house. Covered in blood, she fell in front of her mother.

“They cut my nose. They disfigured me forever.”

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The mother, without getting agitated, asked, “do you have the nose with you or do we have to go back to find it?”

⁴³ An Italian word meaning female dog or bitch.

“Here.” The daughter opened her fist, showing her a piece of red skin.

“Let’s see what we can do. How much time has passed?”

“It has been ten, twenty minutes, I do not know.” The daughter began to scream again.

“Close your mouth, stupid, no watchful woman gets caught with her friend on top of her.”

The mother did not waste time. She went to the hen-house and returned with the biggest rooster. She took a pair of scissors and with one blow she cut its spine. She first brushed her daughter’s nose with the red blood that flowed from the rooster’s spine, then she attached it exactly in its place. She tightened a bandage on top and tied it behind her daughter’s head.

“If you want your nose, you have to stay like this for twenty-four hours.”

“And the pain, Mom, what do I do for the pain?”

“It will pass, that is the only thing that will leave you with no mark,” the mother told her.

Her nose, after twenty-four hours, was in its place. The scars would never disappear completely, but she had a nose.

When poor Mysafir arrived at the doctor’s office there was nothing that could be done. It was disinfected and bandaged. But another nose was impossible. The village doctor was not a plastic surgeon.

Mysafir would wear a white bandage for the rest of his life. And he would become the barber.

After having knocked on many doors in the village, Bedena went to find a wife for him somewhere else.

“Lousy lot,” she would say. “Because of a bandage...”

“I will never find a wife, Mother. I am a monster.”

“With your family’s background, my son, you are a catch. They will realize that a husband without a piece of skin is better than one with a stained family history.”

In the end he would find a wife.

The woman who recovered her nose thanks to the rooster of the hen-house remarried before Mysafir.

Part One, Chapter Seventeen

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Myrto was Saba's last remaining brother. After he returned from the war, he was a different person. This new person got along with everyone except Bedena. In his cruelty, sometimes he said, "the cheese went bad, and all is left is the whey that should have kept it fresh." Bedena's twisted mind wanted to say that her best brothers were dead and the one that was saved was not helpful.

Her sisters and mother did not care much about what Bedena said. They did not have strong relationships with Myrto, but for completely different reasons. Esma, after the separation from her colonel, did not feel like visiting anyone. For Afrodita, perched in the capital, Kaltra was nothing more than a memory obscured by a thousand lights from her theater. Saba instead wanted to see him much more. But things went differently and he make this decision on her behalf.

After the war, Myrto stayed in the village. They proposed transferring him to the capital to occupy some important position... they had survived the war, no? And they had even won!

However, Myrto did not show any interest in the division of the spoils of war. "Yes, I fought," he said. "I did what anyone does when someone occupies your house. But I am only a farmer, what would I do in the capital?" What did he think about all of the partisan farmers like himself who became ministers, secretaries, and whatever else?

"Their business," Myrto concluded. "I fought for the country, not for a throne."

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He devoted himself to his studies, and in the hot summer afternoons he read under the shade of a walnut tree. Sometimes he went to the main square and waited for the bus. The driver came down and opened the trunk of the bus, pulling out huge boxes filled with books. They were the books that Myrto had ordered from the city. Sometimes he loaded the books onto his back

and took the road home with his back bent. Other times he came with a donkey, he put the boxes on its rump and left in silence.

“He is making us look stupid,” Bedena screamed. “Mother, can you not see it? Will you not say anything?”

Meliha watched her daughter and responded calmly. “For me it is enough that he returned alive, regarding everything else he can do what he wants.”

* * * * *

One day Meliha, passing through the courtyard, saw her son under the walnut tree with books around him. He raised his head for a moment and said, “I am getting married.”

“Good *hajer*⁴⁴,” Meliha responded, moving away calmly.

Later her son found her sitting in her chair smoking her tobacco.

“Mother,” he said. “You did not ask me who the woman I am marrying is. Do you not want to know?”

“Why is it important?” Meliha said. “If you like her...”

“It is Saraja, Tana’s daughter.”

“This house needs to be filled with new children, and also with happiness,” Meliha concluded, getting up to go finish her work in the barn.

Bedena went crazy when she heard about the “good news,” like her mother said. Tana’s daughter? The daughter of that *kulak* would become her sister-in-law? Bedena’s children would have a pack of those *kulaks* for cousins?

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She ran to Saba; this time by force they found themselves in agreement. Bedena already saw the red markings scribbled on every request for a school or a job: *kulak*. God, this is not a disaster, this is *the* disaster.

But Saba was anything but troubled. Instead, she was happy.

“After all of our losses,” she tells her, “finally a good thing is happening in our family. A true marriage of love, without outstanding accounts or debts to be paid. He loves her, and she loves him. They are getting married, and they will live happy and content.”

⁴⁴ An Albanian word that can be translated as luck.

But since when did this sister become romantic? Bedena wondered. Saba, who followed their mother like a shadow everywhere? This woman who speaks is the liar that did not dare bring lunch to Emin? If only he was alive, yes he would put them all in their place.

“They cannot be happy, Saba. Don’t you realize? Saraja is the daughter of the *kulak*! But have you become stupid? They are the *kulaks* of the village, how will they ever be able to be happy?”

“Bedena, it is not a mortal illness. Years ago they were like us; these things happen. And then let’s be honest: one works their whole life for a piece of land that overnight becomes everyone’s property.”

“And us? How did we come to understand that it was the best thing to do? Is it not you who says to be happy with this government’s new direction?”

“It is better if you shut up, your husband did not even have a stone to crack over his head, that’s how poor he was. And as for me, you better leave me alone. I like this government, yes, but you don’t understand anything. I am a free woman in this system, free even if I am not rich. Before I was neither rich nor free.”

Bedena did not know what else to say. This damned marriage would happen, and she would become family with Tana, family with a *kulak*.

She ran to Myrto and screamed in his face, “the blood of your brothers has become water to you,

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look what it has become. That shame covers you and all those that you will bring into the world with that...”

“With what...?” Myrto rebutted.

With that nothing. The word did not exist to define his wife. Or if it existed, Bedena could not find it.

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